

## UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

### REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE JOINT ULSTER UNIVERSITY REVALIDATION / NORTHERN IRELAND SOCIAL CARE COUNCIL RE-APPROVAL PANEL FOR REVALIDATION UNIT 26G: SOCIAL WORK (POST-QUALIFYING / POSTGRADUATE).

23 February 2018

#### PANEL

##### Ulster University

Professor D Hasson, Associate Dean (Global Engagement), Faculty of Life and Health Sciences, Ulster University (Co-Chair)

Professor S Martin, Head of School of Health Sciences, Ulster University

Mr K McStravock, President of the Students' Union, Ulster University

Dr D Helm, Senior Lecturer and Programme Director for Social Work Post-Qualifying Provision, University of Stirling

Professor J Manthorpe, Director, Social Care Workforce Unit, King's College London

##### Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC)

Ms S McAteer, Professional Advisor, NISCC (Co-Chair)

Dr K Brown, External Assessor, NISCC Approval Panel

Ms C Maguire, Professional Advisor, NISCC

Mr T McAlister, Professional Advisor, NISCC

##### In Attendance

Mrs A Garland, Academic Office, Ulster University

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The joint Ulster University revalidation and Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) re-approval Panel met to consider the following provision offered by the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences within the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences:

PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work (with Postgraduate Certificate exit award) (Part-time) (Jordanstown and outcentres);

PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research (with Postgraduate Certificate exit award) (Part-time) (Jordanstown) [new proposal].

Re-approval was being sought from NISCC for the PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work programme only.

The Panel initially met with the Head of School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences (Professor K Lasslett), the Associate Head of School (Ms S McCall), the Associate Dean (Education) of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (Professor R Fee), the Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator and Course Director for MSc Professional Development in Social Work (Professor B Taylor), the Course Director for PgDip Professional

Development in Social Work (Dr J Mullineux) and Ms J McGarry from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

The provision was discussed in more detail with the Course Team, which included representatives from the different Health and Social Care Trusts.

## 2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation in advance of the meeting:

- (i) course submission;
- (ii) the University's Guidelines for Revalidation Panels;
- (iii) the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (October 2016);
- (iv) the QAA Characteristics for Master's Degrees (September 2015);
- (v) the NISCC PiP Handbook for Approved Programme Providers incorporating NISCC Standards for Approval (September 2017);
- (vi) the NISCC Requirements and Guidance for Programme Approval within the Professional in Practice Framework (September 2017);
- (vii) external examiner reports for the last two years;
- (viii) Academic Office notes on regulatory and standards matters.

## 3 BACKGROUND

The PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work programme was introduced in 2007 to coincide with the launch of the new Northern Ireland Framework for Social Work Post-Qualifying Education and Training. Social Workers are required by NISCC to undertake post-qualifying training to maintain and improve their knowledge and skills. Post-registration training and learning requirements are set by NISCC and all registered social workers must meet specified requirements within each three-year period after initial registration. The Professional-in-Practice (PiP) framework, which was developed in partnership with Northern Ireland universities and social work employers, consists of the following awards:

- The 'Consolidation Award in Social Work' designed for newly qualified social workers in their first two years in employment, those returning to work after a career break and incoming workers from other jurisdictions;
- The 'Specialist Award' which is designed to develop specialist knowledge and skills for practice beyond Consolidation award level across a wide range of work settings and client groups; and
- The 'Leadership and Strategic Award in Social Work' designed for those in management, policy, regulatory, training and other professional leadership roles.

The Professional Development in Social Work course is approved by NISCC and aims to support professionally qualified social workers employed in any setting of the sector at each stage of their career. By registering with NISCC and enrolling on the University's Professional Development in Social Work course, social workers can simultaneously obtain a professional award from NISCC and an academic award from the University. The Professional Development in Social Work course comprises a series of modules, each of which is intended to address the continuing development needs of qualified and practising social workers at various stages in their careers. The modules are grouped in clusters to form the following programmes:

- Initial Professional Development (IPD)
- Adult Safeguarding Programme (ASP)
- Individual Assessment Route (IAR)
- Practice Teacher Training Programme (PTTP)
- Probation Board NI Programme (PBNI)
- Research Methods Programme (RM).

By successfully completing modules from one, or a combination of, the above programmes, students achieve post-qualifying requirements leading to one of the professional awards (Consolidation Award / Specialist Award / Leadership and Strategic Award in Social Work) and academic credits leading to an academic award (Postgraduate Certificate / Postgraduate Diploma or Master's award). Students receive guidance from agency trainers and academic staff on which programmes correspond to particular post-qualifying requirements and awards.

Within each stage of the Professional Development in Social Work course, modules can be taken in any sequence and are predominantly taught using 'teaching blocks' of one, two or three days supported by Blackboard Learn. Most modules are delivered at hospitals and other Health and Social Care Trust premises. Delivery of the Master's stage modules takes place on the Jordanstown campus. Employers make their own training staff available to teach on the programmes. Most belong to dedicated social work training teams within the Health and Social Care Trusts or in voluntary sector organisations.

The PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research is a new proposal which builds on the existing Postgraduate Diploma in Development in Research in Social Care. While this course does not seek NISCC approval, the NISCC has an interest in the course because of its relevance to social work and because of the joint teaching with social workers undertaking modules within the Research Methods Programme.

The PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research has been developed for services users and carers, unlike the PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work which is exclusively for social workers. The majority of students will be sponsored by social work employers. The programme will be offered in part-time mode only. It comprises five compulsory modules, a 60-credit point module at each of the Postgraduate Certificate and Postgraduate Diploma stages followed by three 20-credit point modules in the Master's stage.

#### 4 MEETING WITH SENIOR STAFF

##### 4.1 Rationale for the Provision

The Panel began by asking the senior staff to explain the rationale for the provision and how it fitted within the PiP Framework. The Panel was advised that the overall rationale for the Professional Development in Social Work provision was to enable social workers in Northern Ireland, at any stage of their career and in any field of practice, to access a development pathway. The new PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care was a service-user course, which was part of an increasing agenda for a number of funded bodies to have service user involvement and aimed to develop knowledge and skills amongst service users and carers.

The Associate Dean (Education) explained that the Faculty sought to invest in global growth and in postgraduate non-MaSN areas. This provision was centred upon transmitting research and professional excellence and provided an excellent example of a partnership. The Associate Dean (Education) confirmed the Faculty's support for the provision in terms of resources.

#### 4.2 PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research

The Panel commended the overall vision of the new course but enquired how service users would be recruited. The senior staff advised that only a small number of students was envisaged. The Health and Social Care Board had undertaken to fund two students per year at the present time. As the course became established, recruitment amongst the voluntary sector would be developed.

#### 4.3 Coherency of PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work

The Panel asked the senior staff to outline the overall coherency of the Professional Development in Social Work provision and in particular how all the modules fitted together in terms of the NISCC awards within the PiP Framework. The Panel was informed that, in 2007, when the original Framework was developed, the two universities in Northern Ireland (Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast (QUB)) took different and complementary approaches. The QUB provision generally had a focus on specialist skills in defined areas, while the provision offered by Ulster University was aimed at flexibility to provide opportunities for all social workers in Northern Ireland within one award structure. All of the provision was linked to NISCC requirements.

The Panel enquired if there was a clear relationship between each module and the Consolidation Award in Social Work, Specialist Award and the Leadership and Strategic Award in Social Work. The senior staff confirmed that each module was mapped against the requirements of the professional awards. For example, modules of the Individual Assessment Route programme and the Probation Board NI programme modules were mapped to the Consolidation award. The Panel was of the view that this had not been clearly explained in the course documentation. The senior staff acknowledged that the fluidity and flexibility of the provision might create a barrier to understanding.

The Panel enquired how the complexity of the provision was explained to employers and if they were interested in the particular modules taken by students or simply in the overall award. The senior staff stated that the provision offered modules that were relevant to the needs of the employers, and had been developed in close collaboration with them. Each Health and Social Care Trust had a lead social work training officer responsible for post-qualifying (Professional in Practice) learning, and the large voluntary sector organisations had a member of staff with responsibility for training. These staff were the main channel for recruitment and advice. In turn, they were informed by the staff (both University and employer) involved in particular Programmes (in collaboration with either university), particularly through the NISCC Information and Development Group which met regularly.

The Panel enquired what support was provided to encourage students to complete the Master's award and was informed that students were directed in their study and set targets by staff in their employer body, such as the Health and Social Care Trusts. Achievement in practice and academically was important to the Trusts, each of which had its own training team to assist staff in their career development and progression.

The NISCC representatives advised that the PiP Framework was being extended to Doctoral level. The development of a professional doctorate structure had been approved by the NISCC Council and was now in the stages of being operationalised. This would provide progression for those who completed the Master's award. The senior staff confirmed the School's support for the Social Work Course Team to pursue the opportunity to extend the provision to Doctoral level. The NISCC representatives highlighted the importance of partnership arrangements and stated that this was a real strength of the current provision.

#### 4.4 Content of PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work

The Panel noted that the Reminiscence Programme had been withdrawn from the Professional Development in Social Work provision and queried the rationale for this decision. The senior staff explained that this provision had been offered in conjunction with the Reminiscence Partnership in Northern Ireland which had had its funding cut. Modules approved by NISCC were however offered by the School of Nursing. Although the Reminiscence Programme had been withdrawn, an Adult Safeguarding Programme had been introduced since the last revalidation in 2012 and the Research Methods programme (aligned to the dissertation stage of the MSc) had been extended from one module to two.

#### 4.5 Internationalisation

The Panel queried if the focus of the provision was too localised and enquired if those who had completed their professional training elsewhere could avail of the programmes. The Panel was informed that the Initial Professional Development Programme included incoming workers as one of its specific target groups, but to date there had been few social workers trained outside Northern Ireland coming to work here and undertaking the programmes. The Panel highlighted the need to equip social workers to work with a changing population in Northern Ireland. The senior staff advised that, in acknowledgement of this, a new Social Work with Communities programme was currently being developed which would comprise three 30-credit point modules at Specialist Award level. This new programme had not been finalised in time for the revalidation but it was hoped that it would be ready for a September 2018 start. In addition, the projects undertaken on the Research Methods Programme were all agreed with line management, and addressed current service needs including changing needs of clients. In response to a question from the Panel, the senior staff advised that there was a range of experience nationally and internationally amongst members of the Course Team.

### 5 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a group of four students comprising one from the Belfast Trust, two from the South Eastern Trust and one from the Western Trust.

#### 5.1 Choice of Modules

The Panel began by asking the students if they intended to take a particular module or group of modules or if they were aiming to achieve the Master's award. The students were of the view that the modular structure worked well as they could undertake a manageable amount of study at a time, but could eventually achieve one of the PiP awards. Given the large number of modules available, the Panel enquired how students selected which

modules to study. The students advised that they chose the modules relevant to their area of practice and their training and development needs. Clear information was available to guide them in their selection of modules and they could meet with staff on a one-to-one basis for individual advice.

The Panel was interested in how coherence was achieved in selecting modules to meet individual learning needs as well as the requirements for the different awards. The students explained that they were able to consult a member of staff from the Trust Training Team or contact staff at NISCC or the University, as well as former students. In addition, detailed information about how the modules related to the various awards was available in University Handbooks and documentation produced by NISCC.

## 5.2 Delivery of Modules

The Panel sought the students' views on the block delivery of the modules. The students explained that, although this involved rescheduling in terms of their work commitments, they recognised the benefit of having a block of time set aside for learning. The students stated that they communicated with each other using discussion boards outside of the block teaching time and there were support groups in their place of employment.

## 5.3 Assessment

The Panel enquired what different forms of assessment were employed, other than essays, and was informed that assignments took the form of, *inter alia*, discussion groups, reflective journals, research proposals and power-point presentations. The students stated that, although some of them had not wished to undertake a power-point presentation at first, these presentations had been very beneficial in that they had helped develop the students' confidence. The Panel was informed that podcasts were also used in the Practice Teacher Training Programme.

## 5.4 Support for Students

Given that some of the students on the course would not have studied for a period of time, the Panel enquired how students returning to study were supported with regard to academic skills. The Panel was informed that academic skills support was available through Blackboard Learn and that support was provided by the librarian in terms of gaining a knowledge base of online journals.

The students stated that they had been inspired and motivated by staff at Open Days, colleagues in their workplace and by their study peers. The students were of the view that self-motivation was essential and they liked the way in which the provision offered different career development pathways. The students stated that their participation in the course not only benefitted them, but also their workplace and service users.

## 5.5 Impact of Study on Student / Workplace / Service Users

The Panel enquired what impact the modules had on the students, their workplace and the service user. One of the students who had completed the Research Methods Programme informed the panel that, as a result she was able to identify areas for improvement in the workplace and that it had also been beneficial to her career development. Another student who had undertaken the Adult Safeguarding Programme advised that it had helped inform decisions in the workplace and had inspired evidence-based practice. The student stated

that her studies had provided a good knowledge base which she hoped to share with her colleagues to enable them also to reflect on their practice.

The Panel asked the students if they had any opportunity to share their learning and was informed that participating in the course had presented numerous opportunities to share what they had learned and to come into contact with those in different areas of social work employment. The course also provided access for students to contacts of staff at the University and in the Trusts.

## 5.6 Overall Experience

All of the students agreed that their experience of the course was very positive and that they would recommend it to others. When asked if there were any changes they would recommend, one student stated that, although they had contacts in their Trusts and at NISCC, it would have been useful to have been given the contact details of former students.

The Panel sought the students' views on what might deter others from undertaking the course and was advised that anxiety about academic writing would be a factor. It also depended on a person's work environment and whether they would be given time to undertake the course.

The Chair thanked the students for taking the time to meet with the Panel and for their contribution to the revalidation exercise.

## MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

## 6 COHERENCE OF PROVISION

The Panel stated that it was difficult to ascertain, from the course document, the coherence of the modules and how they related to the three PiP awards. From discussion with the students, however, it was obvious that the course offered a coherent experience. The Team explained that each Trust had a Social Work Lead Trainer who provided individual advice and group sessions on how to navigate the course. Handbooks provided detailed information on the options available and a standardised induction session, which clarified how the modules linked to the professional and academic credit points, was held across Northern Ireland. The Team advised that the clusters of modules constituting particular programmes fitted together to provide a coherent experience.

## 7 CURRICULUM DESIGN

### 7.1 Curriculum Design Principles

The Panel noted that a number of modules deviated from the expectation of the University's Curriculum Design Principles in terms of module size and assessment requirements and queried the rationale for these departures. The Team justified the 60-credit point modules, *The Evidence-Informed Professional and Organisation* and *Research and Evaluation Methods in Social Work*, as they were MSc dissertation modules requiring a cohesive and rigorous systematic narrative review or a research, evaluation or professional audit project. The 60-credit point *Practice Teaching in Social Work 2* module also required a major piece of work. The 10-credit point modules were included to fit with the number of nominal effort hours required by NISCC for each professional award.

The Panel queried why the workload for the 10-credit point modules and the 20-credit point modules appeared to be similar and was advised that the assessment for these modules was determined by NISCC requirements. The NISCC representatives confirmed that this was the case.

## 7.2 Involvement of Students in Curriculum Design

The Panel enquired to what extent students had been involved in the design of the curriculum. The Team explained that after each module had been delivered, a review meeting was held and the module was revised in accordance with any issues raised. Students were also asked to provide written feedback at the end of each teaching block and were able to raise any issues with their line managers. The Panel was advised that after each assignment, information was sought on what impact it had on the work place. All agencies held their own in-house support sessions after each teaching block where feedback was provided on the teaching and the module content. Commonly occurring themes in markers' feedback were also addressed within modules.

## 7.3 Strategic Drivers

The Panel noted that a number of strategic drivers were acknowledged in the course documentation and enquired how regional developments were incorporated across the provision. The Team explained that each programme had a Management Group, consisting of University staff and representatives from the different Trusts and the voluntary sector, which met twice a year to review the provision. This ensured that the content of the individual programmes was regularly revised to incorporate the latest developments in legislation, policies and research.

## 7.4 Research-Led Curriculum

The Panel enquired how the provision was research-led and was advised that the partnership arrangements with employers was crucial in ensuring that modules remained up-to-date in terms of professional knowledge and skills required by social workers. University Social Work staff had responsibility for areas of the provision which aligned with their areas of research interest and expertise.

## 7.5 Content

The Panel enquired if issues of cost-effectiveness were included within the modules and the Team gave the example of the Research Methods Programme which required students to devise a project plan and resource plan.

# 8 ASSESSMENT

## 8.1 Marking of Assessment

The Panel noted that a double-marking approach was employed for assignments whereby they were marked by a Trust marker and a member of University academic staff and queried how this was managed within the University's specified turnaround time. The Team stated that this approach had been used for a long time and that an efficient process was in place. All markers were required to meet both NISCC and University requirements. The Team was of the view that the process of double marking provided quality assurance

and was a model of good practice with the involvement of academics, as well as practitioners who were up-to-date with the latest changes in policy and practice. The Panel was informed that a standardisation event was held for each programme every year.

## 8.2 Assessment Deadlines

In response to a question from the Panel, the Team explained that there were three assignment submission deadlines across the year. If a student was unable to submit their assignment at one point, the student could submit it at the next submission point, which was within a matter of months. Three Examination Boards were held each year.

## 8.3 Line Manager's Verification Report

The Panel queried the purpose of the line manager's Verification Report which was required to accompany assignments on the Initial Professional Development Programme. The Team explained that this report provided confirmation that the student's line manager was content for the information contained in the assignment to leave the agency and it also acknowledged the line manager's responsibility to the student in terms of allowing time to complete the assignment and supervision of the student's work. This developing arrangement encouraged line manager support and provided a mechanism to engage line managers in the learning of their staff. The Panel queried if this report restricted the students' freedom to reflect critically on aspects of their work in their assignments. The Team explained that the course provided a safe space to reflect on current practice in the workplace and encouraged students to identify gaps in service delivery. Students had the opportunity to express their views in a professional manner in line with their professional code of conduct.

## 9 IMPACT ON SERVICE USERS

The Panel enquired how the impact of the training provided by the course on service users was measured. The Team stated that line managers were asked how the students' study impacted their work place and that this feedback was then collated and reviewed. Changes were made to the provision based on this feedback. The Panel was informed that each of the six programmes was evaluated by the NISCC.

## 10 DIGITAL LEARNING

The Team was asked to outline ways in which digital technologies were used in the delivery of the provision. The Team explained that the *Developing Professional and Inter-professional Practice* was currently the only module in which most of the learning was online. Blackboard Learn was used in other modules to provide course materials and the majority of the programmes now used Turnitin for the submission of assignments. The Team stated that students enjoyed the face-to-face block teaching of modules because of the opportunity to meet with peers as well as the interactive teaching.

## 11 STUDENT SUPPORT

The Panel was interested in the support available for those returning to academic study after a period of time away from study. The Team explained that the modules linked to the Consolidation Award were designed for recently-qualified social workers making the transition from Level 6 to Level 7 study and that guidance on assignment structure and academic writing was provided through the online support resource 'Raising the Grade'. A

'How to write at Master's' pack had also been developed by the agencies. All students received a face-to-face induction session provided by University Library staff and staff from the University's Access, Digital and Distributed Learning Department. This provided the opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with Blackboard Learn and the University's library resources.

## 12 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROVISION

The Panel enquired about the sustainability of the provision and how others, who had not yet engaged in study or those who had not completed the full Master's programme, could be encouraged to do so. The Team stated that the PiP Partnership Committee looked at ways to engage the workforce in this type of personal development and that the flexibility of the awards was also an important factor for many participants. The Team was however conscious that personal circumstances did not always permit social workers to engage in study. The Initial Professional Development Programme was, for example, aimed at newly qualified social workers, the majority of whom were in their mid-twenties and had other demands such as family responsibilities and a new work role. The Panel was advised that NISCC explained the process of registration to undergraduate students and the expectation that they would continue professional development. Many social workers were, however, currently on short-term contracts and some preferred to wait until they obtained a permanent post before undertaking further study. There was also the need to educate line managers as to the benefit of investing in the development of employees. The Team advised that five years ago there had been a healthy engagement in the provision by the voluntary sector but that this was no longer the case owing to financial constraints. The Team stated that the completion of an award had been found to render the workforce more resilient.

## 13 PgDIP/MSc DEVELOPMENT AND CO-PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH

The Panel confirmed that the change in title from 'Development in Research in Social Care' to 'Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research' was appropriate.

## 14 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the following aspects of the provision:

- (i) the evolving assessment methodology;
- (ii) the evolving range of impact indicators;
- (iii) the strong partnership arrangements and wide range of pathways aligned to professional requirements and CPD needs;
- (iv) the significant links with the strategic vision of the University and other policy frameworks;
- (v) the rigor of the processes in place to engage with, and support, registered teachers;
- (vi) the flexibility in the use of 10-credit point modules to meet the needs of those engaging with the provision;
- (vii) the Course Team's acknowledgement of the need to support those without academic skills and those who have been away from study for a long period of time.

The University Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work be reapproved for a period of five years (intakes 2018 – 2022) and the PgDip/MSc Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research be approved for a period of five

years (intakes 2018 – 2022), subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed, and a satisfactory response and revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by 23 May 2018 for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

The NISCC representatives also agreed to recommend that the PgDip/MSc Professional Development in Social Work be re-approved for a further period of five years, subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed.

### Conditions

- (i) that more evidence of the coherence between modules and the three professional awards be demonstrated within the documentation;
- (ii) that all of the points raised by the Academic Office and NISCC in the Appendix be addressed.

### Recommendations

- (i) that the process of double marking be sustained;
- (ii) that the strong collaborative practice model be maintained;
- (iii) that the Team further explore appropriate assessment methodologies within the digital context and engage more with the digital online learning environment;
- (iv) that, given the complexity of the provision, links to individual programme handbooks be made available to Panel members at future revalidations;
- (v) that the engagement of service-users in curriculum design be made more explicit across the provision;
- (vi) that the Team work in partnership to provide an evidence-base to demonstrate how educational opportunities contribute to resilience within the workforce;
- (vii) that the Team pursue the development of a taught doctorate programme.

## 15 APPRECIATION

Professor Hasson thanked the Panel members for their valuable contribution to the revalidation exercise and the Course Team for their positive engagement with the Panel.

Professor Fee thanked the Panel and the Team, in particular Professor Taylor and Dr Mullineux for their work in preparing for the revalidation exercise.